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ABSTRACT

Reading teachers should choose activities and experiences for the classroom that are central to reading. Although a sense of security surrounds the teaching of testable finite reading skills, it is necessary to choose language arts experiences that are not so readily evaluated but still are basic to reading. Listening instruction can facilitate reading improvement; this includes analyzing the listening environments of classrooms, helping children develop the ability to discriminate messages from background noise, and planning experiences in which students listen for sequence, anticipate the speaker, determine meanings, and evaluate the message. Oral language instruction should teach subskills in the following ways: develop syntactic skills by providing experiences in combining, expanding, and transforming sentences; help children enrich their vocabularies; teach the use of stress, pitch, and juncture; and provide instruction in the use of kinesics, proxemics, and haptics in oral communication. Dramatics and exposure to literature have much to offer in enhancing reading instruction; and composition activities, including writing and group editing, help children clarify and shape their thinking abilities and yield insight into the nature of the writing process. (DF)

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# CHOICES: Are There Any, Given "Back to the Basics?"

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by

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Do you know Gilly?[1] At eleven, she's an expert at making choices. Like most of us, she finds that having made one choice usually eliminates the possibility of making some others.

In the beginning of author Katherine Paterson's engrossing book, it is impossible for Gilly to make humanistic choices. She resists Mrs. Trotter's accepting behavior, and in choosing to react this way, she eliminates the possibility of responding to William Earnest's needs. In the end, she decides, quite unlike her earlier choices, to help herself by not running away, but rather staying with her grandmother and coping with the situation. She misses Trotter terribly but knows

CS 004 836

she must stay and adjust. In making this choice, she eliminates the choice of falling back on her earlier, disruptive behavior.

In a way, we as teachers of reading are a great deal like Gilly. Once we have made a choice, the process automatically eliminates the possibility of choosing some other things. How does choosing relate to planning reading programs? And what are the problems we must be aware of, in choosing some things to include in our reading program? What must be left out, as a consequence?

My concern here today is that as we choose, we must make sure we are selecting activities and experiences that really are related to the central nature of reading. Miriam Marecek, writing recently in Language Arts,[2] expressed my concern exactly. After a year spent traveling throughout the country for the "Right to Read Administrative Leadership Program," she was concerned about the programs she saw. Visiting in both large and small, urban and rural settings, she concluded:

> I was distressed to find that what is called reading in most schools is really only skill drill work.

Why is much that is taught as reading really only skill instruction? Why do we so often choose to teach these reading skills instead of other of the language arts?

## Climbing the Reading Tree

Many teachers spend most of their time teaching reading skills. Many years ago, when Wilt investigated language programs, she found teachers ranked reading the most important language skill they taught.[3] More recently, Downing said that comparative studies of fourteen countries indicated the highest priority placed on learning to read was in the United States.[4]

Why do we find it necessary to spend so much time choosing reading instruction? I would suggest that it seems easy and is safe to devote this much

attention to reading. First, it seems easy. Apart from problem readers, teaching reading is easier today than twenty years ago. In a basal approach, one must be impressed by the number of reading series available today, vastly superior to ones used in the past. Literature in modern basals represents a wide range of genres, authors, and points of view. Materials are designed for each grade level, replete with more teaching suggestions than can be used, and providing appropriate means for evaluating progress.

An individualized reading approach is also an easier task than previously. Since Jeannette Veatch's early work,[5] many have described the process of establishing, maintaining, and evaluating these programs, including the encouraging accounts written by teachers. In addition, children's materials-- a prerequisite of individualized reading-- are available in great quantity today. There are obviously other ways to teach reading. Regardless of the method used, much has been done to make the task easier.

Another reason for the emphasis on basic reading instruction may be that teaching reading is safer and more familiar, than teaching other language arts. Mandates from state departments of education and decisions by college faculty ensured most teachers had a reading course before graduation, but not all studied language arts, or children's literature. In addition to familiarity, teaching reading is testable. We can report to parents, administrators, and fellow teachers progress we are making. In an era when accountability is a grey fog seeping over the horizon, we need the security of teaching something we can test.

This comfortable security which comes from teaching testable finite skills is in marked contrast to other areas of language. There are virtually no effective tests of listening at the elementary level; measures of growth in oral language are rudimentary; assessment of knowledge about and response to literature is in an infant stage; and analysis of children's composition skills receives little attention.

Making Other Choices

Despite the ease and safety of teaching reading, to be truly effective we must devote critical amounts of class time to other language arts which are not so readily evaluated. We need to choose experiences in listening, oral language, literature, and composition. After making such choices, we need to articulate to parents why these, too, are basic.

Why bother with these? If indeed we can make children readers, are not these others peripheral? Increasing evidence indicates that success in one of the language arts is intimately related to success in the others. Walter Loban described this phenomonon. After studying over 300 children from kindergarten through high school graduation, he was struck by one aspect of their ability.[6] Those who were good in language arts were also good in reading. Since then many researchers have noticed the same interlinking. A child who is a good listener will usually also be a good reader. A fluent speaker will most often be a superior reader. Children who have experienced a wide variety of literature will understand a writer's intent more easily when reading. Finally, a child who has struggled to write a particular literary form will be more likely to comprehend that form when he encounters it in reading. These and other interlinkings are apparent when one studies children's language. As branches of trees growing close together in a forest link and interwine, so language skills of children are interrelated.

This is a correlative statement, not a causal one. As yet there is only limited evidence that a strong listening program will help children become better readers. However, it is logical to assume that if a relationship is correlated, we can probably cause improvement in one skill if we provide instruction in the others. It is important to realize that successful learning in these other language arts lays a needed foundation for reading instruction. After we as

professionals have recognized this, a second part of our job is convincing parents that class time for listening, speaking, composing, and literature does improve reading skill.

Listening

The first area which needs to become a vital strand in a total reading program is listening instruction. We process most information through listening. Wilt investigated practices in elementary classrooms.[7] She concluded that children spent more than 2½ hours listening during each five hour school day. A related study is one by Rankin, who investigated adult language uses. Of the hours his subjects were communicating, they listened 45% of the time. From these and several replication studies, we conclude that children and adults spend much of their time listening. This factor, plus the correlation between this ability and reading, illustrates the importance of teaching listening skills.

Yet we do little to consciously teach children to be better listeners. Beyond that common adomination, "Now, listen...," how many of us teach children a sequential series of listening skills of increasing difficulty? One reason is that we have few materials to use. When Brown studied language textbooks, he found less than 1% of their content was devoted to consciously developing listening skills.[8] Compared to over forty published reading programs, there are less than a dozen published listening programs. Therefore teachers may need to plan their own sequence of listening lessons. What kinds of experiences seem crucial if we are to develop skilled listeners, who will probably thus be better readers?

To begin, we can analyze our classrooms as environments for listening. Lundsteen comments that often we expect children to listen in milieus which are less than satisfactory.[9] That remark is probably more valid today- in our era of open classrooms- than when she made it.

Next, we help children focus on environmental sounds, to develop their ability to pick out the meaningful messages from a background of distraction. This ability to distinguish figure/ground relations is equally cruical in basic decoding skills. Next, we provide sessions in which children listen to sounds in the room, to determine what they are hearing, how sounds are alike or different, and where sounds are coming from. Try having children identify three categories: sounds from outside the room, sounds from within the room, and sounds inside themselves. From the loudest sounds - perhaps an automobile, to the softest sounds- perhaps the thump of our pulse, we are developing concentration and discrimination listening in such an activity.

After initial environmental listening sessions, we plan experiences in listening for sequence, to anticipate the speaker, to determine meaning, and to evaluate the message. We are not talking simply about listening skills when we teach these however. What is more crucial to reading than concentration? And in listening instruction, we are also developing sustained attention to a task. Most of us probably wish for ways to expand children's abilities in this area. In today's fragmented world where time is too often measured by the minute and a half unit of the television commercial, how do we help children extend their ability to concentrate? Listening instruction is one way.

The Oral Language Component

During the 1930's language scholars called structural linguists began observing and commenting on the nature of language and ways people use it. One of their major contentions was that oral language is primary, and written language is simply a way of recording what is spoken. Until then people considered written language the primary form. Structural linguists felt that oral language was the most important form because:

1. Oral language is the most commonly used mode of expression. Ralph Nichols

reports that seven out of every ten minutes we are conscious, we are communicating verbally.

2. Oral language, the first form a child learns, remains for many the mode in which they feel most secure.

3. All people develop oral language. Of almost 2800 languages in the world, all have an oral form though only about 5% have a written form.

Given the importance of oral language, how do we develop a strand for the reading program, which will help children become better readers? In this, as in listening instruction, teachers need to plan programs of their own, since too few materials are available.

Teachers may raise the question- "Why is encouraging oral language important? My children talk too much as it is." To clarify the need for an oral language component, we need to distinguish between simple talk and oral fluency. We have all known people who talked constantly, and yet said nothing. In contrast, oral fluency is the thoughtful shaping of carefully chosen words into organized sentences. Fluent speech relates with economy and clarity the speaker's thoughts.

To plan oral language experiences, four sub-skills should be considered. One is developing sophisticated syntactic skills. Transformational grammarians are devising interesting, effective ways of increasing children's abilities to organize words in sentences. It is possible to provide experiences in combining, expanding, and transforming sentences. This work can be begun with the very young. In working with first graders, I use three sentences from Arnold Lobel's new book Grasshopper on the Road:

1. Grasshopper walked along the road.
2. He saw a sign on a tree.
3. The sign said MORNING IS BEST.

Having read the story to children, I write these on the board, and pose a sentence combining problem to be solved. How can we put these together to make fewer sentences?

The following are among many ways possible:

1. As grasshopper walked along the road, he saw a sign on a tree which said MORNING IS BEST.
2. Grasshopper walked along the road. He saw a sign on a tree which said MORNING IS BEST.
3. When grasshopper walked along the road, he saw a sign on a tree. The sign said MORNING IS BEST.

Graves[11] provides research evidence of the relation between this skill and reading. A recent study revealed that students who practiced sentence combining techniques scored significantly higher in comprehension questions than those in control groups. The techniques thus seem potentially useful as a logical alternative to answering questions at the end of a reading assignment.

Transformational linguists also advocate showing children how to expand and transform sentences. Van Allen, long concerned with reading improvement, includes ideas for sentence expansion activities in his book Language Experiences in Communication.[12]

Developing syntactic skills of combining, expanding, and transforming is crucial. But the basic building block of sentences is the word, and we plan vocabulary experiences as part of the reading program. We cannot be content with adding words to a child's recognition vocabulary. Rather, an important component of fluency is the ability to use words precisely in speaking. Mark Twain called attention to this when he said:

> The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightening and the lightening bug.

That maxim about precision in vocabulary points out the need to move children toward an enriched vocabulary developed through oral language experiences.

Many writers have commented on the need for developing precision in language. This is not the issue of correct/incorrect usage, or of non-standard dialects, important but different matters. The inability to put thought into words is a serious liability. How do we help children overcome this problem?

One way is to develop understandings about the nature of words. A characteristic of words is that they survive only as long as they mean something different than another word. Cerise is not red is not vermillion is not magenta is not mauve. These each refer to a color which contains red. The qualities are similar, yet distinct. The words remain discrete and alive, continuing to exist because the differences are still apparent to some language users. Another example: fat is not plump is not corpulent is not pudgy is not stout. These convey a slightly different shade of meaning; each carries connotative coloring, positive or negative. Children should understand this basic feature of language, and enjoy it through increasing ability to use such distinctions. Until words come alive with vigor as children encounter them in significant contexts, true vocabulary growth does not occur.

We need to be aware of three ways we vivify words for children. These are related, in that students encounter words in context, through contacts with people, objects, and environments. These experiences are richly laden with vocabulary, and children learn words naturally when they encounter them this way.

First, we plan experiences with people. A third grade learned a fascinating collection of new words when a weaver visited their classroom. As she strung her loom, and showed her craft, they learned about bobbins, boat shuttles, woof and warp. These words were not abstract symbols frozen in print, but meaningful terms as children experienced them and the person using them.

Second, we plan experiences with objects. In doing a unit on senses with kindergarten children, one teacher brought in swatches of fabrics. Children were blindfolded, and encouraged to feel the fabrics with the palms and fingertips of their hands, to rub the material against their faces, and drape the samples over their heads. Some even removed their socks and shoes so they could see what it felt like to walk on the fabrics. Following the experience, children put into words what the materials felt like. Which were similar? Which were unlike any others? As they translated sensations into words, these five year olds were de-

veloping verbal fluency, and learning specific vocabulary names for fabrics. The children were seeing their thoughts encoded into words, and the words later could be read to release the thoughts again. This valuable encoding/decoding process seemed logical to child readers, and laid a foundation for later reading skills.

Third, we plan contact with environments. Field excursions into the community offer opportunities to experience words directly. When one fifth grade studied occupations, they visited an architect's office, and there encountered such words as perspective, elevation, facade, and travertine in a context which made the words memorable.

A third important aspect of oral language is paralinguistic elements. The speaker uses pitch, the highness and lowness of sounds, stress, the amount of force or emphasis given particular words, and juncture, or pauses between words which add meaning to the message. The use of these is often sub-conscious, but to be effective listeners, our students must understand that the paralinguistic message accompanying the basic words often conveys as much meaning as the words themselves. Conversely, if we allow children to think that in decoding the basic printed words they have interpreted the total message, we do them a disservice.

In addition to receptive uses of paralanguage, we help children become better at using these elements of language. Everyone's speech includes paralanguage yet few of us consciously manipulate it for more effective communication. We plan activities for children that will let them practice using pitch, stress and juncture to give subtle shades of meaning, far more expressive than the basic word units might suggest.

Often I will extract a sentence from a book I have been reading to the children, and ask them how we could use paralanguage to convey different meanings. John Burningham's book, Time to Get Out of the Bath, Shirley[13] is a humorous account of Shirley's fanciful, imagined journey while she endures a required bath. One of the sentences extracted from the text can provide an example. The sentence is: "Some people don't even have a bath." We vary the emphasis to alter

meaning:

Some people don't even have baths.
(emphasizing that some do, but some don't)

Some people don't even have baths.
(people as contrasted to animals)

Some people don't even have baths.
(emphasizing the basic nature of baths)

Experimenting with such sentences, children develop their abilities to use this element of language more expressively.

Children also need to develop proficiency in non-verbal elements. Mehrabian, studying components of a total communication unit, estimated that 55% of any message is communicated nonverbally.[14] By use of kinesics, or facial expressions, proxemics, use of space, and haptics, or touching behaviors, we extend and expand the message beyond basic spoken words. Thus, much of what we really mean cannot be communicated in writing. It is important that children become proficient in these critical aspects of communication if they are to realize their full potential as active language users.

One way to develop these components of oral and non-verbal language is through using dramatics as an integral part of the reading program.[15] Rather than an innocuous, pleasant enough peripheral activity, we need to see drama as central to the reading program. Those of us who are interested in drama have been justifying its inclusion for its own sake, for a long time. Recently there has been encouraging research which indicates that effects of dramatization on comprehension can be quantified. Henderson and Shanker,[16] working with black second graders, compared dramatics activities with basal reader workbooks. They investigated children's ability to recognize and recall details, sequence events, and generalize the main idea. Test results indicated that the dramatics approach was significantly more effective than was the workbook approach.

We offer children many opportunities to dramatize stories, so they can understand two aspects of reading. One, as children dramatize, they are translating

a message from one mode to another. Have children read the story of King Midas. As they interpret the King, his daughter, and the servants in mime, movement and actions, children see the printed word is not enough. They must create myriad small details as they enact the story. This experience helps children see that messages can be encoded in many forms. A major difference between language users is the ease with which they can find another way to convey their message. Fluent language users can most often recast a message while those less fluent are usually limited to one way of saying something.

Children learn about a second aspect of reading through drama. Once past the literal level in an upward journey to more sophisticated understandings of reading, multiple interpretations are possible. The skeleton of the story of King Midas tells us what happens, and to whom. But in translating the story into a dramatization, children find out their portrayals vary. In drama sessions children often work in small groups, each rehearsing the story simultaneously, after which they share their scenes, comparing and contrasting their enactments. Given the same bare bones of plot and characters, each group will come up with a unique interpretation, and ways the scenes are alike or different. Children can think and talk about how their conceptions of the characters vary. It is in such discussions as these that verbal fluency skills develop. Frequent references to what was in the story and what was not, lead children back to what is on paper, and what they thought was there. This is sophisticated use of a text to assess accuracy of reading, and skillfulness of interpretation.

Literature as a Choice

Most of us know the reasons for choosing to include literature as part of the reading program. We know the delights of sharing books with children. Who can ever forget the pleasure of knowing adventuresome Miss Hickory?[17] Or the apprehensive feeling in the pit of the stomach, while walking up to the librarian's desk with Rufus?[18] Who can forget sharing with Carey, Charles, and Paul their

exciting adventures?[19] If you had any of these experiences you know the kind of vicarious pleasure which comes from reading. In addition to the pleasure involved, children receive valuable language input from literature, which aids their reading. As their teacher reads to them,

> ...children will be exposed to the syntactic patterns of the literary language they will encounter when reading independently. This in turn will enhance their ability to utilize knowledge of language patterns along with other types of information to comprehend the written message.

Exposure to literature thus results in better readers.

> ...one major reason reading aloud to children is correlated with a rise in reading achievement is the familiarity with the peculiarities of literary language that is gained, especially the exposure to complex syntatic structures and diverse vocabulary not found in most oral language but which are found in most reading materials.[20]

Composition and Reading

Why should we be concerned with children's composition abilities? Few of us make a living by writing; obviously we are not interested in making most children into writers. Yet there is a justification for spending more time in the reading-language program than is currently devoted to writing.

Articulate educators, such as Hughes Mearns, have been calling attention to the importance of helping children become effective writers.[21] Mearns identified the freshness of vision, intuitive figures of speech, and unusual viewpoints expressed in children's writing. Following his early work, a coterie of educators voiced the need for encouraging children's writing. Best known of these advocates of composition is Alvina Burrows, whose approach is based on three assumptions:

1. all children can write creatively.
2. a supportive atmosphere and topics are the main ingredients the teacher supplies, and
3. minimal emphasis on correctness is necessary.[22]

Despite such articulate statement of the values of writing, composition remains peripheral to the elementary curriculum. Far too few children write regularly, and still fewer experience a carefully thought out sequence of lessons of increasing difficulty, designed to help them understand the nature of the writing

process.[23]

Why should we devote time to writing since so few children will write as part of their livelihood? Indeed this is not a minor concern, for at least two reasons. One, the process of writing helps children clarify and shape their thinking abilities. Talk does this also, yet there is significant difference between the kind of clear thinking developed by challenging discussion, and the kind encouraged when one puts words on paper. Oral dialogue is fast moving and reasoning shifts quickly with the changing directions of thought. Much discussion that appears convincing seems so because of the speaker's oral skill, the presence that makes us want to believe. On later reflection, we may wonder why we were convinced. Because of shared associations and instant listener feedback, development of ideas need not be as complete in talk as in writing.

Composition, a slower process, allows for reflection, reaction, change and more change. We can search for exactly the right word, for we can weigh the impact of each word in the sentence, of each sentence in the paragraph. Effective writing makes no unwarranted assumptions about what the reader brings to the page. Exposition is methodical, a process of leading the reader from point to point. In writing, we can discover what we believe about what we are writing. The process of putting thoughts into words invariably clarifies what we think. All of this is, of necessity, a slow process.

The second reason composition is an important part of the reading program is for insights it gives into the process of writing. Many children do experience some composition activities. Few, however, are asked to reflect upon the nature of the writing process itself. My assumption is that if we help children think about the process of composition, they will become better writers. Another benefit is that children will be more sophisticated readers of writing.

One aspect of writing is reshaping what has been written. That process is called editing. Many teachers expect that children will correct spelling,

punctuation, capitalization, quotation marks, and other such items when writing. That sort of mechanical correction is important at one stage in children's writing, though it is cosmetic correction, and not editing.

Editing, in contrast, means helping children reshape the thought content of what they have written to make it more effective. As they learn to consider, not how their composition looks, but rather how it communicates thought, children are learning to edit. In the process, stronger writing results. We begin very simply with kindergartners. After recording a story dictated by a group I re-read it to them. Then I ask, "Is there any place you want to change a word, to make our story sound better?" Note that no mention is made of correctness/in-correctness. I am asking children to use their listening skills, to rely on their intuitive understanding of how English sounds, to decide if changes should be made. Also note that children are asked a question, not given a direction to change what they have dictated. Usually a group will have at least one change to suggest. If not, more reading input may be necessary, with more discussion of the words they liked before they reach the stage of thinking about words in their own writing.[24]

More sophisticated questions can be used with older groups which have had experience in looking at their own writing and thinking about how it could be strengthened. For example:

1. Are there some sentences in my story that don't really need to be there?
2. Do I need to tell my reader something more about my story?
3. Are there any sentences in my story that need to be somewhere else?
4. Is there any place where something is out of order?

As children confront such questions as these, they learn about the nature of language, and the way writers put language together.

One first grade class, children who were not particularly advantaged and whose parents were not especially interested in language, dictated the following:

A tadpole!
He is growing legs.
Look at it wiggle!
Michael can pet it.

Four simple sentences, and not particularly inspired writing. Later that week, the teacher asked them a simple question: "Is there anything we could add to our story to make it more interesting to readers?" After discussion, the group edited the story to read:

A big, black tadpole.
He is growing skinny frog legs.
Look at it wiggle in the water.
Michael can pet it.

That is, I submit, impressive editing for first graders, a significant start in this skill. Beginning very simply, this teacher was helping children develop the ability to look critically at their own work and decide how they wanted to change it. These changes were all additions, simpler than deletion or relocation which come later in the sequence. Yet by the end of the year, the children had also begun to work on these skills.

A final reason for helping children compose is to provide insight into the process of professional writers. Until one has grappled with the problem of trying to get an idea out, to translate an inchoate thought into intelligible words, one cannot really appreciate a finely crafted piece of writing. Once children have tried to put their thoughts on paper they will be better able to understand why a piece of writing is good. Thus a collateral benefit of writing is growing appreciation of what children read.

Summary

There is more than one choice that we can make. Some of us will continue to choose what we know best: reading skills instruction. Children acquiese in our choice- most of the morning, five days a week, and then we wonder why some of them seem bored. I would suggest our choices need to be wider: listening, oral language, literature, and composition must be vital, regularly recurring parts of the reading program. This does not mean we neglect basic reading instruction, but rather that we add other necessary language experiences as foundation to our

program. In doing this we will indeed be choosing what is basic to reading. In the process, we shall be effective in developing children who not only can read, but who choose to read.

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